

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NARRATIVE DESCRIBING THE TRADITIONAL ORIGIN OF THE ARMENIANS

According to the earliest Armenian sources available to us, the Hayq*/Armenians originated as a tribe in Babylon, migrated northward under their patriarch, Hayk, and settled in Armenia.^{1, 2, 3} The Hayq had taken this step because a certain « Bél » had been attempting to dominate all the nations of the Earth and had arrogantly taken divine honours upon himself. After he had established his authority in Mesopotamia, Bél advanced against Hayk, upon which the tribal patriarch gathered his forces and marched to meet the invader. The battle with the vanguard of Bél's army was indecisive, but realising that he could not defeat the main Babylonian force, Hayk fled into the mountains^{2, 3} and eventually killed the tyrant with an armour-piercing arrow.^{1, 2, 3} The invading army scattered, abandoning Bél's corpse on the battlefield.^{1, 2}

This story, deriving from the work of Mar Abas, an otherwise unknown Syrian who, if he existed, probably lived in the 4th or 5th century AD⁴, was originally thought to be historical. Early in the 19th century, discrepancies were discovered in Movsés Khorenatsi's *History of the Armenians*, the principal source for the work of Mar Abas, and after much discussion it was concluded that the earlier part was fictitious.⁵ Other views were that it was myth or legend (*ar'aspel*).⁴⁻⁹ Since that time, thousands of words have been written with a view to establishing the date of its composition,¹⁰ or to prove the truth or falsity of the narrative or the History of which it formed a part, but few attempts have been made to analyze its nature. Abeghyan,⁹ the leading authority on classical Armenian literature, noted similarities in the narrative with other legends, eg that of Sam and Qerqouyi (in the *Shahnamé*), David and Goliath, and William Tell. It was also his view that a number of elements were common to the genre of the epic (*vép*), such as the despatch of ambassadors before the invasion, and the earth tremble during the battle.

The mythological hypothesis is based largely on the fact that the constellation of Orion was known to the Armenians as *Hayk*.¹¹ However, this same constellation was in more recent times named *Napoleon*, and

* Hayq is classical Armenian for « Armenians » and hence « Armenia ».

since he could hardly be described as a myth, this type of evidence is likely to be ambiguous. In searching for other clues, we find no magical or improbable elements in the narrative, except possibly for the ancestry of the contestants. Hayk was a hero (*diutsazn*, of the nation of gods),¹² while Bél was descended from the Titans.^{2, 13} Both were giants (*hska*), perhaps corresponding to the *nephilim* of *Genesis* (vi, 4). Since it was usual in ancient times for rulers to claim divine descent, and at least one historical figure, Trdat III of Armenia, was characterized as a giant,¹⁴ these ancestries prove little. In its essentials, the entire story is perfectly feasible and bears no similarity to the corpus of material generally recognized as « myth ». This hypothesis can therefore be regarded as improbable. Speiser has noted,¹⁵ in the parallel example of Nimrod in *Genesis* (x, 8), that the characters involved were not divine and hence, in all probability, were based on historical personages.

Abeghyan's conclusion was that the Hayk-Bél Narrative was an *interpreted* legend.⁹ He noted that the method by which legends could be interpreted was described by Movsés Khorenatsi (appendix to Book I), and pointed to Khorenatsi's observation that the legends about Queen Shamiram coincided with Mar Abas's account (Book I, 18). At the same time, Abeghyan conceded that the narrative could eventually have been based on historical events. Malkhasyants's view was that the Hayk-Bél conflict represented the unsuccessful Babylonian invasions of Armenia, and the following Ara-Shamiram battle indicated the success of Assyrian arms against Urartu.⁸

Indeed, many of the elements in the narrative can be identified with known events in ancient Mesopotamia. The deification of Bél in his lifetime, for example, leads to Naram-Sin of the Dynasty of Agade, or to Ur-Nammu of the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur. Naram-Sin was the first king to be treated as a god and to claim the universal title of *King of the Four Regions*.¹⁶ The symbolic divine helmet worn by Naram-Sin on his stele* is matched by Khorenatsi's description of Bél's iron headgear « with ends bearing symbols ».¹³ The death of Bél while on a campaign could refer to another Mesopotamian king, Ur-Nammu, who also appears to have been deified, and to have been abandoned on a battlefield.¹⁷

On the other hand, judging from the monuments such as the Naram-Sin stele, the detailed description of the heavily-armoured Bél^{2, 5, 13} (« copper » plate armour, greaves, double-edged sword, spear and

* Found incidentally at Diarbekir, on the confines of Armenia.

shield, in addition to his helmet) accords little with the 3rd millennium BC. It reminds us more of the war equipment of the later Assyrian Imperial army, so that Bél could conceivably be identified with Sargon II (8th century BC), who also died on a foreign battlefield and who, according to Sennacherib, « was not buried in his house. »¹⁸ Various scholars have speculated on the place of this battle, the most probable sites (Urartu,¹⁹ Tabal,^{18, 20} Media²¹) all being in or around Armenia. Another connection with the eighth century is to be found in the seven « brothers » of Hayk,³ who are curiously paralleled by the seven « brothers » (with their seven cities) of king Russ I of Urartu, recorded by Sargon.²² Unfortunately, while there are many factors in favour of this identification, there are two difficulties : the Assyrian kings were not deified, and they used *scale* armour. Plate armour accords with Greek and Philistine usage, but these peoples are foreign to the sense of the narrative.

Hayk's use of « three-winged » arrows,¹³ if by this is meant trilobate arrowheads, also indicates special knowledge, for they are believed to have been first used by the Scythians,²³ and later by the Persians. But such arrowheads were also used by the inhabitants of Armenia and have been found in the storeroom of the Urartian fortress at Karmir Blour.²⁴ The knowledge of the presence in Armenia of bowmen with armour-piercing arrows is perhaps less striking, since one may assume that they still existed in Khorenatsi's time, but it is of interest to note that such bows were used by the Kardukhi (the inhabitants of Kordouq) when Xenophon²⁵ was passing through the Armenian area ca 400 BC.

From these examples, it may safely be concluded that the narrative contains genuine historical data, but that the information comes from different periods. At this stage of the argument, therefore, we should follow Collingwood²⁶ in rephrasing our question to ask, not whether the story is true or false, but *what it means*. Khalat'yants asked this question specifically with regard to the *Primary History*² as early as 1898. His conclusion²⁷ was that it was an elaborate and erudite forgery, prepared for the Bagratouni princes in order to establish the kinship of their family with the royal Arshakounis (Arsacids). If this view were accepted, then at a later date the Bagratounis must have become disenchanted with a genealogy connected with the indigenous Patriarch Hayk and his deified descendant, Angegh, because Khorenatsi, who wrote specifically at the request of a Bagratouni prince, then devised an alternative genealogy from an otherwise unknown Jewish exile named Shambat'.²⁸

One of the basic objectives of the writer of the Hayk-Bél narrative

was to discover the genealogy of the princes of the Armenian nation. This is evident from Khorenatsi's dedication addressed to Prince Sahak Bagratouni in which he says, « ... while constructing the genealogy from father to son, we shall write the ethnology of the *Nakhararoutiuns** of Armenia, where and how each one originated, relating it briefly and in proven form as it is found in some Greek histories. »²⁹ This intention he confirmed by entitling his first book *Genealogy of Great Hayq*, and is echoed in King Vagharshak's complaint³⁰ that, « of the principal people of this land neither the first is apparent nor the last. » Indeed, according to a later writer (the 10th century Bishop Oukhtanés) what Mar Abas had found in the royal archive was a document on the order of precedence of the *Nakhararg* of Armenia.³¹

This objective was achieved by tracing the ancestry of the Armenians to Yapetos** through T'orgom (Togarmah) and the Patriarch (*Nahapet*) Hayk. An horizontal connection was also discovered in the Georgian History³ through Hayk's seven brothers (Qart'los, Lekos, Kavkas, etc) who represented the Georgians and other Caucasian peoples. This genealogy was widely used by later historians; in particular, a colophon dated 1315 reproduced the fundamentals in a form which gives us an insight into its true meaning : the Armenians were of « the Aramian nation » (*azgs Arameni*), « the race of Hayk » (*ser's Hayka*), and « the T'orgomian stock » (*zarms T'orgomyan*).³²

In the absence of other data, genealogies also served as a chronological system. Khorenatsi made great play of his discovery that the number of generations from Yabet'/Yapetos (Japheth) to Aram, from Qam (Ham) to Ninos and from Sem (Shem) to Abraham, were equal.³³ By this method he was able to place Hayk approximately in the period of Nebrov't/Nimrod (descended from Ham)^{***} and hence both to equate Bél with Nebrov't, and to distinguish him from Ninos.

A genealogy as such, however, could have been satisfied with a simple list of names like the Assyrian King List. The narrative served to answer another question : why did Hayk and his tribe migrate to Armenia? The answer was that the Armenians had refused to worship Bél who had set up images of himself to be adored by the tribes.² It was also through a sense of independence, the Armenians

* The allodial princes of the Armenian commonwealth.

** Khorenatsi calls him *Yapetost'č*.

*** In fact, the genealogy from Qam to Ninos is one generation short, so that Bél is parallel with T'orgom and not Hayk.

could not be compelled to obey Bél. This is emphasized in the following way. After Hayk had settled in Armenia, Bél sent his son and trustworthy companions to urge him to return.¹³ « Thou hast settled in the cold and the frost, but warm up and soften the icy coldness of your proud nature and, by accepting my rule, live a life of ease wherever it pleases you to select a dwelling place in my land. » But Hayk sent the ambassadors back « with a stern reply. » Later, during the battle, Bél offered Hayk an high position « as the head of the huntsmen of my house, » but Hayk again refused.^{2, 3} The story thus described the independence of the Armenians, their refusal to worship a false god, and their despisal of high office and earthly honour obtained by ignoble means, even at the expense of living in an inhospitable land. It is the epitome of the national character.

Finally, the narrative tells us *how* the Hayq achieved their independence. On hearing of Bél's approach, Hayk announced to his tribe that they would fight to the bitter end,¹⁴ « Either we die and our *aghkhk** falls into the servitude of Bél, or we demonstrate the success of our arms over him. » In the event, the Hayq won the first battle, but realising that they could not defeat the main Babylonian army, they retreated,^{2, 3} apparently employing guerilla tactics, and eventually by an « awful deed of bravery, » Hayk killed his arrogant adversary.^{2, 3, 15} This episode summarized the fundamental relationship between Armenia and the Mesopotamian states up to the time of the demise of the *Nakhararq* around the 11th century AD.

In the first place, all attested Babylonian and Assyrian military expeditions into the Armenian mountains, from the 3rd millennium BC to the fall of Babylon in the 6th century BC, failed to subjugate the inhabitants of Armenia. In at least one case, that of Sargon II of Assyria, the king died in battle and his body was not recovered,¹⁶ a fate similar to that of Bél, whose « corpse was embalmed with drugs, taken to Harq and buried on an high place. »¹³

Secondly, the consternation caused to a foreign army by a united Armenian force meeting the invaders on the frontier and then engaging them by guerilla tactics is well-known from Armenian history.³⁴ The Romans were particularly astounded by this strategy since they understood only the language of the battlefield. States were won and lost by success or failure in war, and it was incomprehensible to their politicians that any other system could exist. As a consequence, of eight puppet kings placed by the Romans on the throne of Armenia

* *aghkhk* is a comprehensive term including kin, household, livestock and chattels.

between ca 20 BC and AD 62, seven were either forced to flee or were assassinated. Significantly, these kings are completely unknown in Armenian tradition. Even the destruction of the royal city of Artashat by Corbulo in AD 58 was so counterproductive that the Romans voluntarily sent reparations to assist in its rebuilding.

The defensive gathering of the tribes and their advance against the foe is first mentioned by Tiglath-Pileser I of Assyria in the 12th century BC : « Altogether 23 kings of the Nairi lands summoned their chariots and troops, and advanced to give battle. »³⁵ In the words of Khorenatsi's History, « the shrewd and prudent giant [Hayk] ... hurriedly collected his sons and grandsons, brave men and archers, very few in number, together with others who were subject to him... Advancing whole *asparéz*-s they reached a plain, between the highest mountains. They took up a strong position on the right side of the current on a plateau... »³⁶ Similarly, Darius tells us in the Behistûn inscription³⁷ that, « When he was come into Armenia, the rebels assembled and advanced against Dâdarshish to give him battle, » in one of his five encounters with the Armenians. The exact details of such a defence of the homeland in the 5th century AD is known to us uniquely from the Armenian point of view from Yeghishé's *On Vardan and the War of the Armenians*³⁸ and P'arpetsi's *History of the Armenians*.³⁹ « An order was given to all the troops to gather at the city of Artashat, ... And hurriedly they all reached the place of the battle, each [Nakharar] with his troops, fully prepared ».⁴⁰ Yeghishé then listed the 27 *Nakhararq* participating in the confrontation. The guerilla strategy followed the battle automatically : « Although the number of those left alive was greater than those that had died, nevertheless they dispersed to various strongholds and took control of numerous cantons and impregnable forts. »⁴¹

Our picture of the Hayk-Bél narrative is now complete :

- It defined the genealogy of the ruling princes of Armenia in terms of the language of the period in which it was composed. *
- It epitomized the national character : the love of independence and the refusal to worship false gods, even at the expense of worldly comforts.
- It served as a manual for the defence of the homeland, indicating the strategy which was regularly followed over thousands of years by the ruling princes of the Armenian commonwealth.

* The traditional date for Movsés Khorenatsi is the 5th century AD, but several scholars have proposed dates as late as the 9th century. The date of the *Primary History* is similarly variable.

It remains to decide whether the narrative could be a genuine legend, or whether it was fictitious, composed in the absence of any popular tradition.

The numerous elements of the story which can be traced to actual events of ancient western Asian history undiscovered until recent times indicate that the writer had knowledge which was subsequently lost. Among the features which tend to reflect the presence of a genuine basis is the description of the invasion of Armenia by an Assyrian/Babylonian army and the defeat of the invaders, since such an outcome was otherwise unknown in antiquity. The only other extant recorded invasion of Armenia from the south prior to the 6th century BC had been that by Ninos and/or Semiramis/Shamiram, described in independent legendary versions by Diodorus³⁹, the *Primary History*² and Khorenatsi,⁴⁰ in which the Armenians were defeated. The same event is probably described in a Greek fragment,⁴¹ although in that case the outcome is not clear.

One of the criticisms of Khorenatsi's method of writing history is his derivation of place names and tribal names from eponymous individuals.²⁷ These are considered to have been backward derivations, eg that the patriarchal name Amasia⁴² was concocted from that of Mount Masis and not the reverse; and similarly the Patriarch Aramayis/Armais⁴² from the city of Aramavir/Aramayir². All of Khorenatsi's derivations cannot be explained away in this manner, however. The name of the county of Shirak from Shara, son of the Patriarch Aramayis,⁴² for instance, is not straightforward. We must ask why the name selected was not *Shér*, from which *Shirak* would have been the normal derived form according to Armenian phonological rules. And it is to be noted that Shara was a Sumerian divine name, while the suffix « -k » could be the Sumerian genitive case ending. Khorenatsi tells us that his written source corroborated a popular saying : « You have the gullet of Shara, but we do not possess the granaries of Shirak »,⁴² showing that the name Shara was indeed connected in folk tradition with Shirak. An even more important example is the naming of Mount Aragads, which Khorenatsi tells us was given by the Patriarch Aramaneak « in harmony with his own name. »⁴² The harmony is hardly apparent; it can only be that this enigmatic statement hides an important historical fact, connected perhaps with the Urartian royal name Argisti. Khorenatsi's report that towns were named after the Patriarchs, eg Haykashén and Hayq from Hayk,^{2, 12, 13} is impressive since this was a feature characteristic of the long-forgotten early inhabitants of Armenia, the Hurrians⁴³ and Urartians.⁴⁴

The ancestors of Hayk, quoted from the *Origin of the Ancients and the Discourses on the Ancestors* : Yapetos, Merod, Sirat' and T'aklad, Khorenatsi equates with Yabét (Japheth), Gamer (Gomer), T'iras (Tiras) and T'orgom (Togarmah)³⁰ respectively. It would have been quite unnecessary to have invented the first set of names. They must have been quoted because they existed in the material at his disposal. Further, there is independent confirmation that Japheth was closely associated with the « Armenians ». In a Jewish legend, the King of Armenia (whose son had been killed by Joshua) sent a message to Joshua that in 30 days he, together with his allies the Kings of Persia and Media and « the renowned hero Japheth », would come to do combat.⁴⁵

It is also interesting to note the striking resemblance of the basic genealogy^{31, 42} with the Assyrian King List.⁴⁶ Hayk, his seven brothers, three sons and two grandsons (Kadmos and Baz), would correspond to the first 17 Assyrians who were « tent-dwellers » and, in Lewy's view, not successive kings but the ancestors of the constituent tribes.⁴⁷ The specific form of the Patriarchal List from Hayk to Ara, which Khorenatsi quoted from a minor work of Abydenos,³³ is comparable with the next section of the Assyrian list. It consists of eight names, given *in reverse order*, from « Ara Geghetsik son of Aram », to « Aramaneak son of Hayk, who opposed Bél and at the same time put an end to his life. » The second section of the Assyrian King List consists of « 10 kings who were their ancestors »,⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ *also listed in reverse order*.

The selection of the names of the « sons » of Hayk, if they were fictitious, was indeed a fortunate coincidence. For, while the eldest son, Aramaneak/Armenak, could have been inspired by the common designation for the Armenians used by the Greeks and the Persians, how did Manavaz and Khor' arise? Admittedly, Manavaz was the ancestor of the Manavazyan tribe,⁴² (associated with the city of Manavazakert), and Khor' that of the Khor'khori'ouni tribe,⁴² and they could have been backward derivations. But if so, why should the name of the ancestor of the latter tribe have been Khor' and not Khor'khori'? And, what is more important, why were these two tribes selected for this high position of honour? We now know, of course, that Manavaz is connected with Menua, one of the outstanding kings of Urartu (perhaps *Manav-az* = of the tribe of Manav/Menua), and Khor' represents the earlier inhabitants of Armenia, the Hurrians.^{49, 50} The three sons of Hayk thus represent the principal constituent peoples of the Armenian/Hay nation.* There is, consequently, internal

* It may be significant that, of the three, Manavaz and Khor' only were « born » in Armenia. 2, 12, 42

evidence that the author of the Hayk-Bél narrative had historical information available to him which was not rediscovered until modern times.

Finally, what is the significance of the fusion of historical incidents from widely different periods? It represents a clear indication of the legendary nature of the Hayk-Bél narrative. The truths recorded in legendary history are timeless, and to fit them into a chronological mould would be as meaningless as it would to write conventional history without it.

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